

MERCY WRITES STRAIGHT WITH CROOKED LINES

“He who puts his hand to the plow and keeps looking back is not worthy of the kingdom of God.” Keep looking back. I ask myself: Do I do that? Do I keep looking back at my past? So much so that I begin to live back there or allow the past negatively to influence the present moment? Ask yourself the same question. Do you yearn for the good old days? Do you mentally live in them, back there, rather than in the present moment? Or, do you keep your eye on what is happening right around you? Do you allow the regrets of the past, which we all have, to influence your present attitude way too much?

Do you find yourself saying things like: I should have married him (or her)? I should have taken that new job. I should never have moved. I should have spoken up. I should have kept my mouth shut. I should have stood up for her. We all have missed opportunities in our past and the effect of them lingers on in us. Sometimes the effect becomes so strong it paralyzes us and saps our freedom, our choosing in grace in the present moment. There will always be regrets in our lives but right now, the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ is still available to us no matter what the past has been.

Instead of living in the past why not choose to live in this moment? Christ does not live in the past, nor in the future. Christ does not abide anywhere but in this present moment, right before us. Right here. Right now. We will only encounter him right here, right now. But it is not easy to live in the present moment, to take it one day at a time. We have to choose to do that—every day, and all throughout the day. We can allow our past sins to defeat us but we don’t have to let our sins defeat or overwhelm us. After all, they are only sins and they are all forgivable by the grace and mercy of God..

About a year and a half after I was ordained a priest, while I was assigned as an Assistant Pastor I hit a rough patch in my life. I was floundering and I didn’t know why. I had always wanted to be a parish priest and now I was one. So what was wrong? I spoke to another priest older and wiser than myself who said something very simple to me. He said that for ten years as a seminarian I had had a very clear goal that I was pursuing, to become a priest. I had finally reached that goal. And in the afterglow of that accomplishment I didn’t realize that I had now no goal before me. It was only after the passage of time that I began to sense something was missing. He said it was because I had no goal. I asked him what should be my new goal. His response was simple. Ask yourself, now that you are a priest, what kind of priest do you want to be. When you decide that, set your heart on that and allow it to become your new goal. And that was what I did and the crisis passed.

Recently I was speaking with a woman who had just gotten back from a week’s visit with her elderly parents whom she had not seen in a few years because they live far away. She had been in touch with a friend of hers who is a Religious and who has known her much of her life and knew her family situation. Her friend contacted her and asked her to do her a favor when she went home. “Sure. Whatever you want.” “In this Jubilee Year of Mercy go home to your mom and dad with mercy in your heart for your mom and dad.” And she did. That was the goal in her heart when she arrived. She didn’t do any of the “busy” things she had planned to do when she went home. She just spent each day with her mom and dad. And there were breakthroughs and tears and smiles. Her goal was to be a merciful daughter to her mom and dad for the week she visited. She spoke to me of how she herself felt that something was healed in her heart during that week. And the thought of her heart needing to be healed had never consciously entered her mind before her friend spoke to her.

In this past week I spoke with several parents. One has a couple of sons struggling with alcohol. Another a daughter who is probably heading back to prison for parole violations. And the third was waiting for her son to be released from prison for substance abuse violations. All the young people were struggling with their freedom and trying to achieve a balance between being their own person and being the slave to one or more inner compulsions. The parents were each asking me for prayer and did I know of anything that might help them with their kids or helped their kids. There were some things I was able to suggest. Both parents and kids were struggling to cope with stuff that they probably never expected to have to cope with. What kind of parent? What kind of son? What kind of daughter? What is the goal?

What kind of Catholic do you want to be? What kind of man? What kind of woman? What kind of spouse? What kind of parent? What kind of friend? But as we think about these things we must be careful not to allow the failures of our past or the sins of our past to dominate us. That includes not just our own personal sins but the sins that have been done against us which we must deal with. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy why not adopt an attitude of mercy towards those in your past and towards yourself in terms of your past? And as you ask yourself what kind of person do you want to be, ask yourself if the mercy of Christ truly has a prominent place in your life. Or has the Lord and his mercy been relegated to a lower position? Who holds the highest priority in your life?

According to Jesus the challenge for us is to accept the mercy He has brought to us as a gift from His Father and in that way we put him first and then trust that all will fall into proper perspective in our lives. I am not talking about our verbal claims or mental claims that Christ is first in our lives. I am asking that we look at what is really going on and whether we have pushed mercy away and allowed our past to rob us of the grace of this present moment. What is past is truly past if we want it to be. All is forgiven if we want it to be. God's mercy is available to us if we open to it. What matters is how we live right now and whether Christ and his mercy are truly at the center or on the periphery of our lives. Let us resolve to live in the present and allow our Lord to meet us right here—in Eucharist.